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ABSTRACT

Chinese children must attend school until age 16, and education consists of elementary schools for ages 6-13 and lower middle schools for ages 13-16. While the economic planning of the national government in Beijing (China) dictates what will be emphasized, the school curriculum includes instruction in ideology, Chinese language, calligraphy, fine arts, mathematics, science, and physical education. The lower middle school students are divided into five educational tracks that include academic or pre-college, vocational, technical or factory production, minority education, or computer technology. The teachers for these schools hold a two-year certification received after middle school. A typical classroom contains 55 to 60 students, and school is in session 6 days a week for 11 months a year. Only 30 percent of the students enter higher middle schools for ages 16-18, and only 3 percent attend a college or a university. A national achievement test determines a student's major field of study, profession, or occupation and which institution will be attended. The instructors who teach six hours a week with an additional three hours for political studies, generally have only bachelor's degrees. Funding for education is received from the national and local ministries of education, and in the case of Liaoning Province, where Shenyang, the fourth largest city in China is located, funding also comes from the ministries of agriculture, construction, and health. (DJC)

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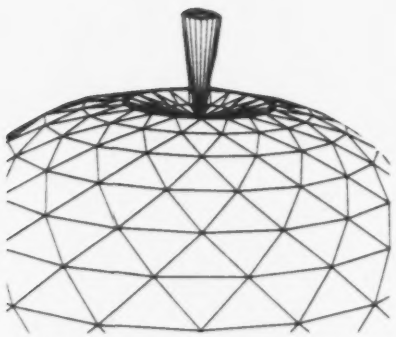

A YEAR AS AN EDUCATOR IN NORTHEAST CHINA

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FOREWORD

This monograph is a summary of Richard Elias' colloquium presentation during the fall semester of the 1987-1988 academic year. The World Education Colloquia are sponsored annually by The Isaac N. Thut World Education Center and The World Education Fellowship, Connecticut Chapter (WEFCONN). The other titles in the 1987-1988 series of World Education Monographs are:

1. Timothy Reagan
   The "Language Struggle" in South Africa: Emergence and Development in Educational Policy.

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Frank A. Stone
General Editor
World Education Monographs Series

A YEAR AS AN EDUCATOR IN NORTHEAST CHINA
August, 1986 - August, 1987

Richard F. Elias

An Invitation to China

The invitation to teach at the Shenyang Architectural Engineering College in Liaoning Province of the People's Republic of China came in early April, 1986. My course of action up to that point had been to have a brief talk with a secondary school teacher who had taught in China as a foreign expert some years before, and to write the Foreign Experts Bureau in Beijing in June, 1985. The letter of invitation that I received the following spring offered me a position teaching English, primarily to the faculty of the College, along with giving instruction to a small group of graduate students and a larger group of undergraduates, referred to as "top students." After requesting a sabbatical leave from my high school and receiving very enthusiastic support for my plans to spend the time in China, I began preparing for the venture. It turned out to be a fascinating experience that I hope all teachers could one day have.

Where was I Going?
How could I Direct my Observations and Experiences?

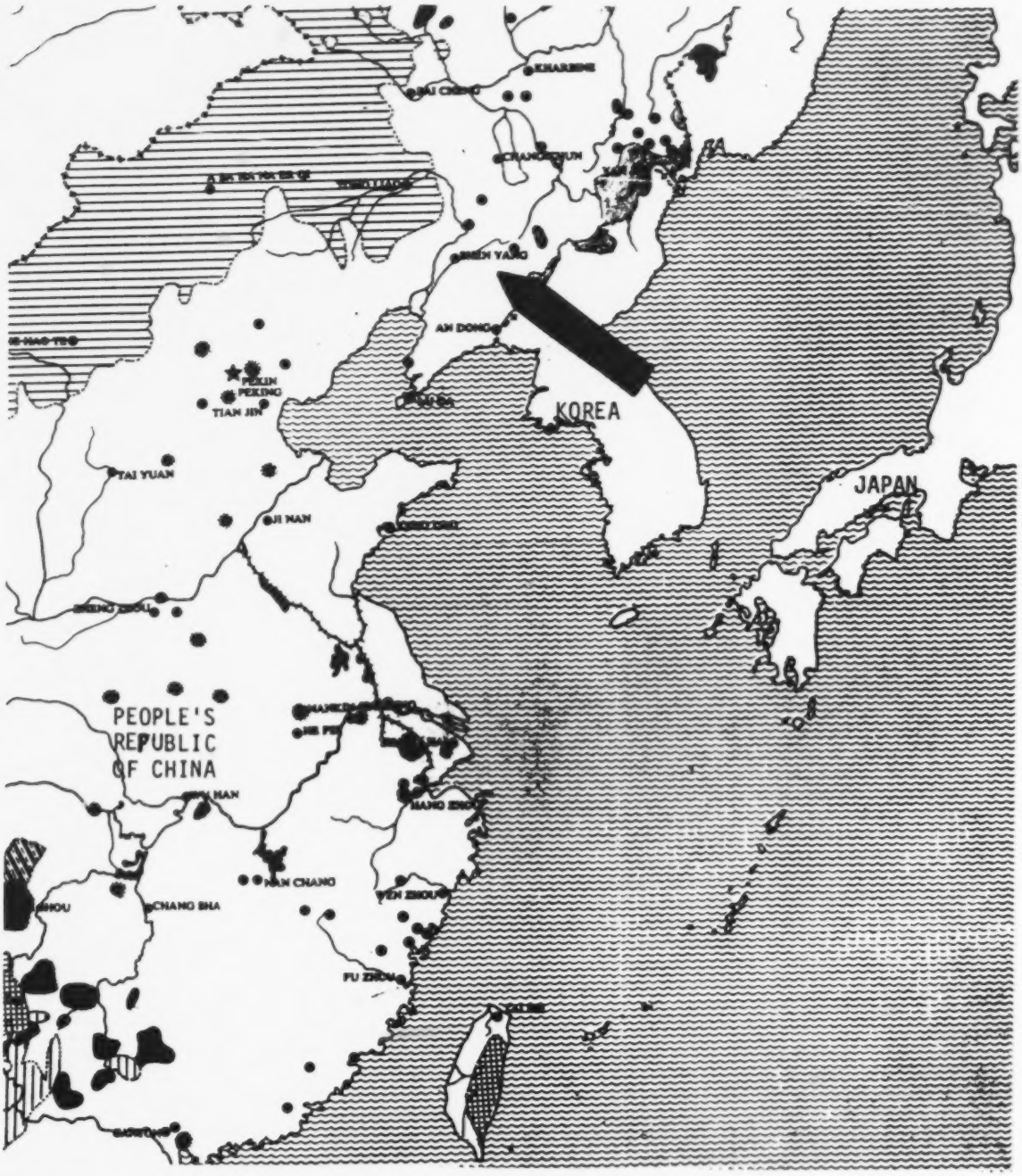
A short time prior to my departure in August, 1986, after a good deal of reading and much thought, I decided that I would like to channel my experience toward a study that would seek to discover the interrelationships between Shanyang's economic, political, and social goals and its educational system. I wanted to examine what is called "community based education."

I set my goal to visit as many schools as possible during my months in Shenyang. I was going to try to fathom the connections between the forces that shape educational policy and practice in China, and the actual status of the local school system. Since few people in China go on to higher education and only about sixty-five percent of those who begin can complete their elementary education, the framework of education is quite different from its counterpart in the United States.

My year's experience in Shenyang, China would, I hoped, help me to understand these relationships. At the same time, living and teaching in China, I anticipated, would provide me with a comparative mirror in which I could better understand our own American education/community relations.

MAP ONE

THE LOCATION OF SHEN YANG IN
THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA



Source: Nagel's Encyclopedia-Guide: China. Geneva: Nagel Publishers, 1978.

The "What" and "Where" of Shenyang, China

When a map of China is consulted, as I quickly did after receiving my invitation, the City of Shenyang will be found in the northeast region of the People's Republic. As it was described to me after I arrived in China, the shape of that nation is much like that of a chicken ("ji") and Shenyang's location is right at the top of the chicken's throat. Readers can find the City of Shenyang by referring to the maps on pages two and four.

The city is immense, much larger than I had imagined - some five and a half million people. It is China's fourth largest city and among the top twenty-five metropolises in the world. Although the people are overwhelmingly Han Chinese, there are thirty other nationalities living there as well. Most notable among them are the Manchus, the group who gave their name to the area, Manchuria. There is also a fairly large Korean minority population in Shenyang. Other minorities are Hui and Mongolian peoples. My assumption was that some response to this ethnic diversity would be evident in the city, and I did find that the educational system was responding to it.

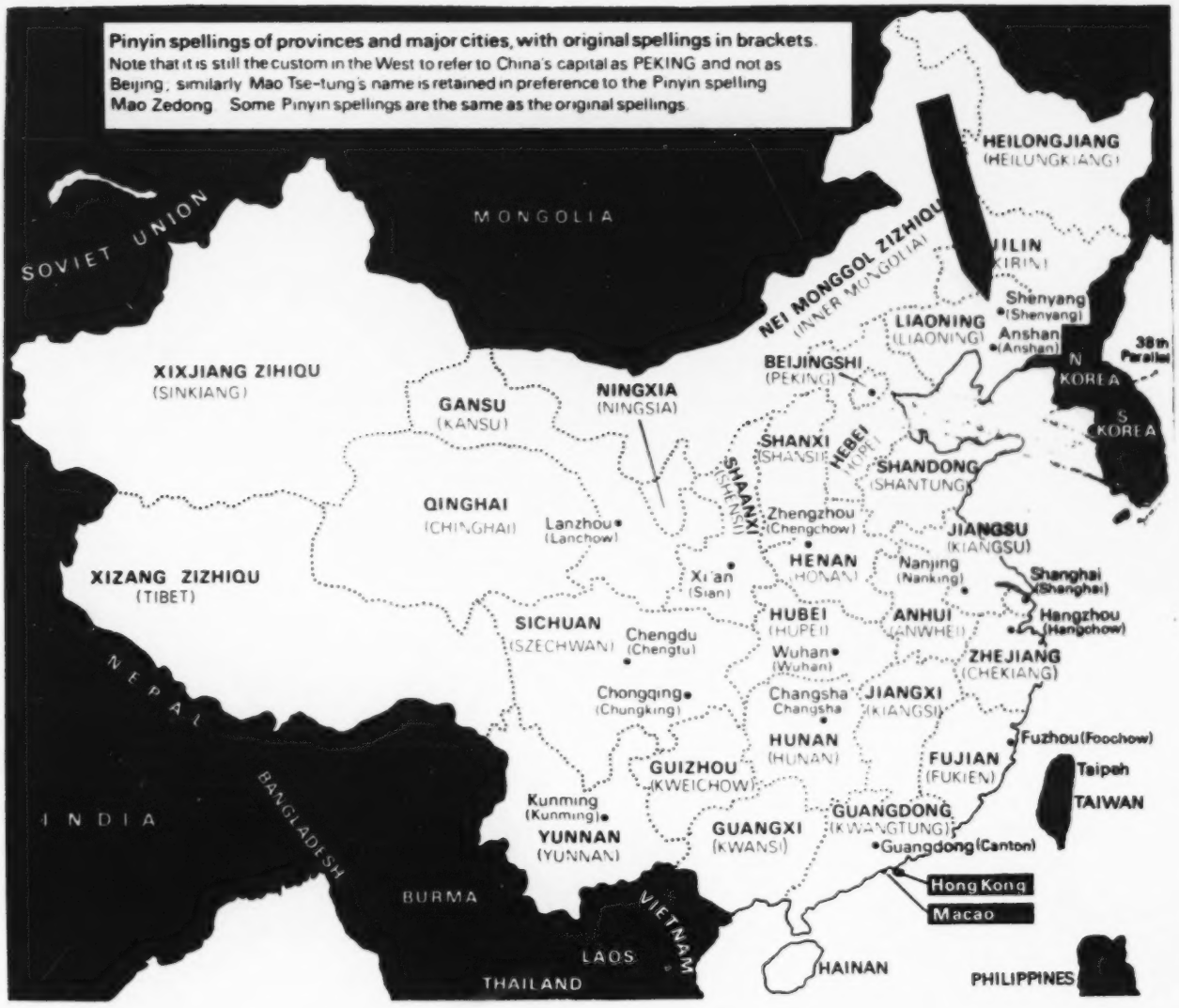
Historically Shenyang stretches back to approximately 6000 B.C.E. in terms of human habitation. Its heritage has been examined by means of archeological excavations, and an exhibit of the artifacts that were found in the northern part of the city has been prepared. The Manchu people had used Shenyang as their regional capital during the last thousand years. It was from this power base that the last dynasty of Imperial China - the Qing - eventually seized the throne in the seventeenth century. Thus, in the years after the Manchus came to power in China, Shenyang had a special status and received imperial patronage as the place associated with the roots of the Qing dynasty.

The city was called Mukden in the twentieth century. It was the center of Japanese industrial expansion during the 1930's and 1940's. During the Second World War and then the ensuing Civil War period, massive battles and heavy destruction were experienced by the people of Shenyang. Since that time Shenyang has mushroomed in size and importance. Like the other "frontier cities" of the Northeast. it now provides many of the heavy industrial needs of the Peoples' Republic of China.

Geographically Shenyang is situated in Liaoning Province, which is located on the broad northern flood plain. This part of China also includes some beautiful mountains in the eastern region near North Korea, and a more temperate marine climate on the peninsula that is the setting of the port city of Dalian. At forty-two degrees north latitude, Shenyang has a position similar to that of Connecticut, but its climate is much more severe, particularly in winter. Shenyang is the political and social hub of northeast China, being the administrative headquarters and transportation center of the whole area. These were some of the chief factors that would have an impact on the educational system that I had come to observe.

MAP TWO

THE LOCATION OF SHENYANG IN LIAONING PROVINCE
AND THE OTHER CHINESE POLITICAL DIVISIONS



Source: Brian Catchpole, A Map History of Modern China. London: Heinemann Educational Books, Ltd., 1982, "The New Face of China," p. 147.

Politically Shenyang has been known as a conservative city in China since the "liberation" in 1949. Strong support for Mao Zedong and conformity to Communist Party policy have been the norm. A massive statue of Mao still stands at the center of the city, even though most others in the Peoples' Republic have been discreetly taken down. Mao's nephew still controlled the city politically, according to my sources, up until a short time ago. Today, with more liberalization going on in the coutry, it seems that the conservative grip on Shenyang is loosening. A more open system with local and individual direction seems to be emerging now.

Shenyang is economically prosperous because it lies on a flood plain surrounded by fertile fields. Vast amounts of food can thus be locally grown, including rise production that was encouraged by the Japanese in the 1930's. With its access to the rich coal and iron deposits of the region, and the vast lumber resources of the North, Shenyang is advantageously located. It owes its industrial prowess to these factors. When the natural resources are coupled with access to petroleum and hydro-electric power, Shenyang becomes the logical place for heavy industry. The list of things made there includes automobiles, tractors, airplanes, metal products, petro-chemicals, bicycles, appliances, textiles, contruction materials, food products, and electronic devices. This list is long and each of these industries provides a fine income for its employees, making Shenyang a "boom town" of sorts. The city is attractive for people looking to better their economic condition. Its workers average about 800 yuan per year, which is about twenty-five percent higher than the per capita income in other parts of China. Naturally the urban services and opportunities are more plentiful here, too, in a nation that is still some eighty percent rural and agrarian. As we might expect, the educational system of Shenyang reflects the city's economic profile and vocationally based learning prevails.

Education in Shenyang and Liaoning Province

The education system within the City of Shenyang and the surrounding province, as one would expect, reflects the diversity of the population, the local economic conditions, and the winds of change blowing in the general political climate of the Peoples' Republic of China. The entire municipal region including the city and its surrounding "suburbs" has a total population of five and a half million people, of whom about 2,100,000 are its school population. These local students are attending 2,060 schools that include:

Twenty colleges and universities, included the one to which I had been assigned.
Thirty-seven professional schools
One hundred fourteen technical schools
Twenty-four agricultural and special schools

Shenyang's student population of 2.1 million, due to the birth control policy known as the "One-Child Family,"is somewhat skewed because of the declining rate of births. After 1978, therefore, a sharp drop in the size of families can be observed. The total numbers, however, because of the constant migration of workers into the city, remain large. Yet when compared with earlier periods, the number of school-aged children and youth is a smaller percentage of the sum total than previously. Most of these current students were the products of the "baby-boom" years of the 1960's and 1970's.

The principle of legal mandatory universal education applies in Shenyang until the person reaches the age of sixteen. The reality in the city and its surroundings, however, is more like this:

Elementary Education

Beginning at the age of seven (although some moves to begin schooling at age six, as in our country, were beginning to be observeable) children are supposed to attend elementary school until the age of thirteen. The percentages of actual attendance vary considerably, especially in the more rural areas, and the quality, too, is diverse. Model schools were shown with pride, but if compared with American elementary schools, they would be considered sub-standard.

Lower and Higher Middle School

The Chinese Lower Middle School serves the thirteen to sixteen year old age group. It is the institution where about seventy percent of the students finish their formal schooling. The reality, however, is that some twenty-five percent have left school prior to the middle school level for mixed working and learning situations.

About thirty percent of the students continue on into the Higher Middle Schools that serve the sixteen to eighteen year old population. These schools have highly competitive entrance requirements and vary considerably. To get into the "right" school at this point, therefore, is crucial to each person's ultimate success because national testing is administered in order to determine one's opportunities for further education.

Higher Education

Only about three percent of the population can go on to college and university level institutions. Academic achievement on the national tests gives the major field, profession or occupation, and the school to which each individual will have access. There are higher technical and special schools for those students who haven't made high enough scores on the national examinations, but these are not as prestigious as the colleges and universities.

One of the major concerns of the community leaders and educators with whom I talked was the fifty percent unemployment rate for the young people who had finished their formal schooling, usually by the age of sixteen or so. Work units tried to solve this problem by "creating" jobs for their workers' children, and at times they provided on the job training, too. Even on the higher education level, however, the under-utilization of human resources and talent could be observed. Upon the completion of their university programs, young people were often again "misplaced" because of their performance on the national examinations or the availability of slots to be filled.

The student unrest during 1986-1987, to a large extent, was due to the students' frustrations about choices and career directions. The Shenyang region is part of a nation where education is being totally subsidized by the government, despite its limited resources. This wastage of costly education and training presents the Chinese with new problems due to poorly utilizing their high level manpower. Their leaders appear to be waking up to the reality of this situation, and greater economic flexibility may provide better outlets for the knowledge and skills of the highly selected few who get through the Chinese school system, but often are not presently being well utilized.

The elementary and middle school portions of the Shenyang Education System are administered by the Ministry of Education. There are eleven school districts in the city composed of many types of schools and associations. College-linked, community-regional, army-affiliated, and production units, for example, are examples of the specialized types of institutions in Shenyang. The curricula of these schools have been influenced by many factors. One key aspect, of course, is the economy of the region and the entire Peoples' Republic of China - funding comes from both sources. Generally speaking, however, it is the economic planning of the Central Government in Beijing that dictates what will be emphasized. The " Four Modernizations" Movement that emerged during the mid-1970's, for instance, had an enormous impact on the creation or re-creation of schools, shaping their curricula, and setting their financing. The goal, of course, was to bring back institutions that, in many cases, had been closed during the Cultural Revolution of the late 1960's and early 1970's.

Political movements such as the Cultural Revolution and the earlier "Great Leap Forward" of the 1950's generally have played havoc with the continuity of Chinese education. It now appears, however, that the lessons of this history have been learned. Steadier developmental policies and more thoughtful changes based upon realistic political factors seem to be prevailing. As the economic capacity of China grows, greater resources are being devoted for teacher preparation and foreign language instruction, especially English as a Second Language. The goal seems to be to make it possible for students and teachers to draw upon the scientific and technical knowledge of the West, after which the Chinese have tended to model their systems of learning and production.

Another factor that seemed to be shaping the curricula taught in Shenyang schools is the diverse local ethnic composition. I could see that special deference was being paid to the minority groups. What is being taught in certain schools and areas of the curriculum reflects the policy of respecting cultural pluralism, within certain boundaries.

The scope and sequence of the curriculum, in a general fashion, has this format.

Pre-School

Until the age of seven the program is mainly concerned with socialization and functions primarily as day-care for the children of workers. On the campus where I was teaching, for example, a rather large pre-school attended by about one hundred fifty children was operated as a "fringe benefit" for the faculty and staff, totalling about 3,000 people.

Elementary

The elementary school program contained eight areas: (1) ideology, (2) Chinese language, (3) calligraphy, (4) art and music, (5) mathematics, (6) science, (7) physical education, (8) Young Pioneers.

Middle Schools

During secondary education there seemed to be two main goals. First, the school programs were designed to further develop the first seven aspects of the elementary curriculum. Second, the student population was being selected and segregated into five tracks: (a) academic/pre-college, (b) vocational, (c) technical/factory production, (d) minority education, and (e) computer technology.

Higher

The stress placed on scientific and technical areas could clearly be observed - eighty-five percent of the higher education institutions in Shenyang were devoted to these fields. There was only one comprehensive university in the entire city - Lieoning University. There were, however, many specialty schools such as those for ballet, opera, a music conservatory, a sports training school, and even a well known acrobatic school.

The Teachers

Upgrading teacher training and re-training veteran teachers in order to extend their skills have been priorities of the Chinese Ministry of Education. These policies have been particularly implemented since the demise of the Cultural Revolution, during which teachers were in disrepute and teacher education had virtually stopped.

Today the majority of teachers are functioning with a two-year certificate earned after completing their own Middle School education. Four year teacher education programs following secondary school are few, and they present problems because it is necessary to free up veteran teachers to take part in them, and the veterans aren't easily spared. Most teachers in the United States would consider it dismal working conditions if they were to have fifty-five to sixty students in their classes. Yet this is the reality for the teachers working in the schools of Shenyang. School meets six days a week, and there is an eleven month school year. Coupled with the numbers of students that they are expected to teach, these conditions in China have created a much publicized "teacher burnout" problem. This topic was scrutinized on the pages of *The China Daily*, the national English-language newspaper and on national television. Resolving the problem, of course, is something else again.

Most of the faculty employed in higher education in Shenyang were teaching with bachelor's degrees. Many, however, do seek permission and funding to go on and earn their master's degrees. This goal is difficult to accomplish and was mentioned as the "dream" of many faculty people. I was approached by at least two dozen colleagues and students who sought my aid in getting into some graduate school in the United States. Generally speaking, faculty at Chinese institutions of higher learning appear to be under-utilized. They teach six hours a week, with three additional hours a week given over to political studies, which generally seemed not to be much appreciated by them. Their earnings are not very different from those of elementary and middle school teachers. They bring in from seventy to 200 yuan a month, plus many benefits from their work unit such as health care, continuing education, housing, and the "iron rice bowl" security in their jobs.

Funding Education

Financial resources in a Third World nation such as the Peoples' Republic of China have been difficult to come by. The national policy, however, has been to designate education as a priority among the "Four Modernizations." The Chinese leaders recognize that education is the vital link between their most extensive resource - people - and productivity which will lead to economic prosperity. Economic success is the major goal of the Four Modernizations Movement, and this rests on improving and expanding the educational system.

Liaoning Province and Shenyang City have, through their "guan chi" or connections, obtained a special status which allows them to receive funding from the national Ministry of Education, as well as from other ministries such as Agriculture, Construction, and Health. It was this arrangement, in fact, that led to my being appointed to teach English at an Architectural-Engineering College. The subsidies coming in from national bodies increased during 1984 from ten to thirty percent in the total funding being given. At the same time, the Liaoning Provincial Department of Education provided an additional jump in support for education from thirty to forty percent. Local work units and other groups such as the army brigades were also responsible for increasing the total funding available to support education. They also raised their financing by between thirty and forty percent; so overall there was a considerable improvement of educational funding in the region.

The expenditures for students, per capita, during 1986 were within these approximate ranges, according to my sources and the translations of educational reports to which I had access.

Elementary School per capita expenditures:	Seventy to 170 yuan.*
Middle School per capita expenditures:	150 to 200 yuan.
Higher Education per capita expenditures:	300 to 1500 yuan.+

My Broader Education

My two most important direct educational experiences came from my own teaching of English and my contacts with teachers/students in my college. I was also fortunate to be directly involved with my ten year old daughter's elementary school located directly across from the college. This school, The Wen Hua Lu Elementary School, was jam-packed with over 2,500 students. The condition of its building would be considered rather poor by American standards. Through the experiences of my daughter in this institution, I got many insights into the pattern of education in what was reputed to be the "second best" elementary school in the city.

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* A yuan is officially worth about twenty-seven cents, but its buying power in the Chinese economy is much greater than this indicates.

\+ College students also receive thirty yuan spending money.

I did also have the opportunity of visiting the "Peace School." This is considered to be the "number one" elementary school in Shenyang. It is operated for display and used to show foreign visitors to the city like myself. I also visited two other elementary schools in Shenyang, one that was linked with an airplane factory in the city, and another that is located on the outskirts of the metropolis. A teaching colleague at the college made these field trips possible. The two more typical elementary schools that I observed were quite dispiriting in terms of their physical conditions, but learning was clearly taking place in them and the children I saw were obediently following the curriculum that was set before them.

I was also able to visit four Shenyang high schools ("middle schools" in Chinese terminology.) Among them were the "first" and "second" best in the city, according to local opinion reflected in the perceptions of my informants. Two vocational technical schools situated in different parts of the city were also open to me. These were both linked to factories, and their administrators welcomed me graciously. My best experience. however, was in the Middle School directly in back of my college. There I was able to go into a classroom and have a "free talk" of about forty-five minutes with sixteen and seventeen year old Chinese students. They had many questions to ask about American schools and culture. They also seemed willing to respond to my queries about their educational experiences in Shenyang.

My observations of higher education came through visits to Liaoning University, the Shenyang Music Conservatory, Shenyang Teachers' College, and the Liaoning College of Pharmacy. These contacts were made through foreign teachers, like myself, who had been employed to teach English. Usually there would be an opportunity for "free talk" with the students and some of the faculty. Despite the personal problems that they spoke of concerning how to intermesh the educational outcome of their years of study with the socio-economic and political structures of their society, these individuals who were within the formal learning process still expressed hope for the future. They believed that the approaches being taken during the last few years by their government were heading in directions that would fulfill both China's and their needs.

Some Lasting Thoughts

The immensity and diversity of China are mind boggling. The "mystery" of this huge society still exists in my mind. I recognize the great tasks that are before the Chinese people and their leaders in reforming and extending the national education system.

Education, in my belief, is the way out of many of the difficulties that contemporary China faces. By channeling more of their resources toward the future, and by coupling them with the great commitment to improve and progress by the Chinese, this society can be transformed in this next generation.

A paradox, however, still exists for many Chinese. They have a fascination - even an adulation - for the West and western culture, yet a xenophobic mentality persists based on the Chinese cultural tradition and the recent historic experiences of the society. Again, education and more international contacts, ought to change this currently paradoxical outlook.

Chinese political attitudes and policies appear to be in flux. The Communist Party structure is being altered. The role that the Party plays in the society is changing from merely parroting the popular slogans to really "getting down to business" by improving the lot of the Chinese people in all ways - including education.

The attempts of Chinese educators to develop international connections between their schools and overseas institutions are still meager. The most extensive connections have been made on the higher education levels. At the elementary and middle school levels very little contact has been made. What does exist is primarily with the Americans, British, and Japanese - and to some extent with the Germans. Active participation in and endorsement of United Nations programs and initiatives, however, have permeated the Chinese curriculum. As Shenyang opens itself up economically to the world, more foreigners will have contact with its people. More local students will be returning from their educational experiences abroad. Education in Shenyang should soon begin reflecting these changed conditions, given the directions and momentum of the last few years.

Can Shenyang's educational system be considered "community based?" In the opinion of this observer, most certainly. Besides having provided for widespread basic literacy - a major achievement in and of itself - for all students, the present system seems to be moderately effective in supplying the economic needs of the region. The local schools are geared to training youngsters for the economic activities in that part of China. The continuing dilemma, however, is how to expand the economy fast enough to absorb the new graduates and school leavers, thereby eliminating much of the current frustration and under-utilization of human resources that seemed to be evident.

A Visual Presentation Using Slides

The module visualizing my year's experience in the People's Republic of China was organized around eight topics.

1. Shenyang and Liaoning Province
2. Student populations in pre-school, elementary, middle and higher education
3. The East China Normal University

   The possibilities of a developing a relationship between this institution in Shanghai and the School of Education, The University of Connecticut.
4. The new and old capitals: Beijing and Xian
5. South China: Guilin and the Li River
6. South West China: Kunming, Dali, and Yunnan Province
7. Xinjiang Province: the West, Urumqi, Turfan, and Tian Chi
8. Glimpses of Chinese society: the people and street scenes

Arrangements for other programs for school groups or professional educators can be made by contacting:

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Mansfield Center, CT 06250